

Dear Colleagues:

On December 9 and 10, 2003, the Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) program, a part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), convened a meeting at the Melrose Hotel in Washington, D.C., that brought together stakeholders, program officials, researchers, and representatives from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to discuss one important topic: plant health safeguarding in the United States. I would like to thank everyone who participated or attended this very productive and valuable meeting.

By all accounts, 2003 was one of the most exciting and challenging years in PPQ's history. In March, over 2,000 port inspection personnel with our Agricultural Quarantine and Inspection (AQI) program were transferred to DHS' Bureau of Customs and Border Protection (CBP). In addition, a number of PPQ officials stationed at APHIS' headquarters in Riverdale, Maryland, whose work focused on the day-to-day operations of PPQ inspection personnel, joined DHS, forming the core of CBP's new Agriculture Inspection Policy and Programs staff. Mary Neal, CBP's first Associate Commissioner for Agriculture Inspection, and formerly PPQ's Assistant Deputy Administrator for AQI, did an outstanding job of leading the transition and establishing, from day one, the importance of agriculture's mission within CBP.

PPQ's inspection personnel had accounted for much of our field force, and the transition of this component of the AQI program to DHS has brought PPQ and CBP together in a unique partnership designed to protect the United States from terrorist attack and prevent exotic plant pests and diseases from entering the country. The broad parameters of this partnership—USDA, for instance, continues to inspect imported propagative material, set import regulations for agricultural commodities and maintain oversight of agricultural training for CBP personnel—are defined in the Homeland Security Act of 2002, and PPQ and CBP are also working to further specify important issues—such as how user fee funding will be collected by PPQ and transferred to CBP for services rendered, as well as lines of communication available to our personnel—through numerous memoranda of understanding.

The DHS transition followed on the heels of one of PPQ's most important recent endeavors: the highly successful Safeguarding Review conducted by the National Plant Board. Since the Plant Board issued its review in 2000, PPQ has worked very hard to review, prioritize, and implement over 300 recommendations that have significantly strengthened our plant health safeguarding programs. As I stated in my opening remarks at the meeting, my goal in asking PPQ's stakeholders to gather and begin a dialogue on the most important and evolving issues facing us today was very simple: to help us take stock of where PPQ stands as an organization and ensure that we, in cooperation with our stakeholders, maintain the momentum begun by the Safeguarding Review.

During the meeting, PPQ heard several important messages from our State and industry partners. Mr. Rick Kerchoff, Executive Director of the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA), spoke, among other things, of the need for more

collaboration and communication between PPQ and State officials to ensure that resources and infrastructure are in place to quickly detect and, if necessary, respond to introductions of exotic plant pests and diseases before they cause significant harm to agricultural industries or the environment. And Mr. Bill Dickerson, North Carolina's State Plant Regulatory Officer and President of the National Plant Board, expanded on Rick's comments by describing that, in many cases, the responsibilities and roles of PPQ and State officials are intertwined when it comes to plant health safeguarding. State agriculture officials rely on PPQ to do what they cannot do: gather and disseminate information on the foreign plant pests and diseases that pose the greatest risk to U.S. agriculture. Quite simply, Bill said, better intelligence gathering and sharing on PPQ's part would help State officials support and augment our vital domestic safeguarding programs.

Foremost on the minds of industry speakers was the move of AQI personnel to DHS and the need for meaningful dialogue with CBP and PPQ officials on the range of issues tied to inspections of agricultural commodities at U.S. ports of entry. Several speakers commented that PPQ's establishment, in conjunction with CBP, of a quality assurance program for port inspection is an important step, one that will help improve information sharing and communication with stakeholders. On other fronts, Mr. Craig Regelbrugge with the American Nursery and Landscape Association urged PPQ to continue to enhance our scientific and technological capacities to refine our safeguarding programs, as well as conduct top-notch risk assessments on foreign import requests. Mr. Andy LaVigne with Florida Citrus Mutual reinforced that PPQ and our stakeholders must remain committed to working together to address the complex—and often contentious—issues facing us, such as risk assessment and trade facilitation. Finally, Mr. Ron Gaskill with the American Farm Bureau Federation reminded us of industry's strong interest in the role PPQ plays in developing international plant health standards through our work with the WTO's International Plant Protection Convention and the North American Plant Protection Organization.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Mr. Jayson Ahern, CBP's Associate Commissioner, and Dr. Mike Orazé, a former PPQ employee and now with CBP's Agriculture Inspection Policy and Programs staff, for participating in the meeting and sharing with us information on DHS' structure and operations, as well as their insights into how PPQ, CBP, and our stakeholders can come together to maximize the results of our new partnership. As Mary Neal similarly commented during the break-out session on the stakeholder role in DHS, it's important to keep in mind the challenges inherent in building a new organization like CBP from different legacy agencies focused on distinct missions. As CBP has worked through this process over the last year, they have heard continuously from PPQ, State officials, agriculture stakeholders, members of Congress, and a host of other about the importance of the agriculture mission and our commitment to working together to keep agriculture inspection a robust and effective part of our safeguarding operations. In participating in the stakeholder meeting, listening to our concerns, and answering our questions on issues such as agricultural training for new CBP officers, I think Mr. Ahern and Dr. Orazé did much to show stakeholders that CBP

is similarly committed to making our partnership work, to the continued benefit of U.S. agriculture.

I would also like to thank Under Secretary Bill Hawks and APHIS' Administrator, Bobby Acord, for sharing with us their unique perspectives on the importance of agricultural safeguarding in today's world. Mr. Hawks and Mr. Acord both acknowledged the challenges facing PPQ and our stakeholders right now, but reinforced that in working together to meet these challenges, we will find even greater success in the coming years. Quite simply, Mr. Hawks and Mr. Acord said, PPQ is redefining itself as an organization—one that will be stronger, more streamlined, more technologically advanced, better prepared to address our myriad safeguarding responsibilities. But for this transformation to occur, we need closer collaboration and more dialogue with our stakeholders to help us direct our efforts and resources. For his part, Mr. Acord singled out our cooperative domestic pest surveillance program as a critical area requiring our long-term dedication and support. If we are better able to find and respond to pest outbreaks *before* such situations reach critical mass, Mr. Acord said, if we have better information on the exotic pests that present the greatest risk of finding their way to the United States, we'll avoid repeats of our experiences with citrus canker, Asian longhorned beetle, and, most recently, emerald ash borer.

Finally, I would like to thank all of the staff from PPQ who participated in the meeting, either as presenters, participants in our breakout sessions, or active members of the audience, listening to concerns raised by stakeholders and asking their own questions of the PPQ management team and representatives from CBP. As Under Secretary Hawks likes to say, working together works, and the stakeholder meeting would not have been as successful if PPQ had not shared some of our most important initiatives and ideas with stakeholders.

To this end, in my opening remarks to the meeting, I gave an overview of PPQ's work over the last year and my future priorities for the organization. As usual, Paul Eggert, PPQ's Associate Deputy Administrator, gave a spirited presentation on PPQ's budget, and Cathy Enright, Assistant Deputy Administrator for Phytosanitary Issues Management, briefed everyone on PIM's efforts to take a more strategic approach to facilitating both import and export trade requests. Dr. Chuck Schwalbe, Assistant Deputy Administrator for Pest Detection and Management Programs, explained one of PPQ's most important recent initiatives—OPIS, the offshore pest information system—and Dr. Gordon Gordh, Director of PPQ's Center for Plant Health Science and Technology, gave a presentation on CPHST's creation of a global pest and disease database (GPDD), as well as other initiatives designed to enhance PPQ's information collection and risk assessment capabilities. Jim Reynolds, PPQ's Western Regional Director, and Jerry Fowler, PPQ's Eastern Regional Director, gave us their perspectives, respectively, on PPQ's adoption of the Incident Command System for emergency programs and our bolstering of our pest detection programs. And last but not least, Dr. Arnold Tschanz gave an overview of his work to review and revise PPQ's quarantine 37 governing the importation of propagative material, and Alan Green, Director of PPQ's Quarantine Policy, Analysis, and Support staff, followed Mr. Ahern's and Dr. Orazee's presentations

on CBP and discussed his work to make sure that a solid foundation is laid by PPQ and CBP that will keep our partnership strong and effective for years to come.

All of these presentations, in addition to summaries from the individual breakout sessions, have been posted to PPQ's website, and I encourage stakeholders and PPQ employees alike to review them and continue the dialogue begun during the meeting. Now more than ever, PPQ has the opportunity to enhance the communication and partnerships forged with our stakeholders, and I am wholly committed to making this goal a reality in the coming years. As Paul Eggert said quite succinctly during the meeting, while PPQ's port of entry inspectors transferred to CBP last March, all that underlies the inspections they perform—rulemaking, policy setting, data collection and analysis, scientific risk assessment—remains with PPQ. These are the areas PPQ will be focused on in the future, and I ask for your continued involvement and input into this process. My staff and I look forward to working alongside you and ensuring that PPQ continues to be the world's premier plant protection organization.

Sincerely,

Ric Dunkle
Deputy Administrator